

Unleashing the Power of Creativity and Intelligence

Bill Gates - Redmond, Washington

Bill Gates founded Microsoft on the dream of putting a computer in every home and office. He says he built his company on the belief that technology, creativity and intelligence can change the world.

I've always been an optimist and I suppose that is rooted in my belief that the power of creativity and intelligence can make the world a better place.

For as long as I can remember, I've loved learning new things and solving problems. So when I sat down at a computer for the first time in seventh grade, I was hooked. It was a clunky old Teletype machine and it could barely do anything compared to the computers we have today. But it changed my life.

When my friend Paul Allen and I started Microsoft 30 years ago, we had a vision of "a computer on every desk and in every home," which probably sounded a little too optimistic at a time when most computers were the size of refrigerators. But we believed that personal computers would change the world. And they have.

And after 30 years, I'm still as inspired by computers as I was back in seventh grade.

I believe that computers are the most incredible tool we can use to feed our curiosity and inventiveness — to help us solve problems that even the smartest people couldn't solve on their own.

Computers have transformed how we learn, giving kids everywhere a window into all of the world's knowledge. They're helping us build communities around the things we care about and to stay close to the people who are important to us, no matter where they are.

Like my friend Warren Buffett, I feel particularly lucky to do something every day that I love to do. He calls it "tap-dancing to work." My job at Microsoft is as challenging as ever, but what makes me "tap-dance to work" is when we show people something new, like a computer that can recognize your handwriting or your speech, or one that can store a lifetime's worth of photos, and they say, "I didn't know you could do that with a PC!"

But for all the cool things that a person can do with a PC, there are lots of other ways we can put our creativity and intelligence to work to improve our world. There are still far too many people in the world whose most basic needs go unmet. Every year, for example, millions of people die from diseases that are easy to prevent or treat in the developed world.

I believe that my own good fortune brings with it a responsibility to give back to the world. My wife, Melinda, and I have committed to improving health and education in a way that can help as many people as possible.

As a father, I believe that the death of a child in Africa is no less poignant or tragic than the death of a child anywhere else. And that it doesn't take much to make an immense difference in these children's lives.

I'm still very much an optimist, and I believe that progress on even the world's toughest problems is possible — and it's happening every day. We're seeing new drugs for deadly diseases, new diagnostic tools, and new attention paid to the health problems in the developing world.

I'm excited by the possibilities I see for medicine, for education and, of course, for technology. And I believe that through our natural inventiveness, creativity and willingness to solve tough problems, we're going to make some amazing achievements in all these areas in my lifetime.

Bill Gates is chairman and chief software architect of Microsoft. Under Gates' leadership, Microsoft's mission has been to improve software and to make it easier for people to use computers. He and his wife founded The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which funds global health, education and public library projects.

The Stillness of the Library

Clint Morehead - San Diego, California

As heard on *The Bob Edwards Show*, October 25, 2013



When Clint Morehead was still in medical school, he often spent upwards of 10 hours a day studying at the library. More important than the aesthetics of the space around him, Morehead finds that libraries provide a valuable place to go—inside himself.

Age Group: [18 - 30](#)

Themes: [education & knowledge](#)

I believe in studying.

I often find a room in my school's library that reminds me of a cell in a monastery. The room is white and perfectly still. Here, I move fluidly through my notes, textbook, atlas of human anatomy, and back again, without the distraction of even a breath. For me, studying has become a solitary ritual, but I am not alone. There are other students in identical rooms, heads hinged down, shoulders hovered above fiberglass tables, reading as if they were searching for something elsewhere.

This library was built forty years ago when no architect seemed to care much about aesthetics. The walls and ceilings are a mixture of stones and pieces of shells, stuck together in a sea of gray. A rusted black and yellow sign bolted near the entrance designates it as a fallout shelter. Now, inclement weather is what sounds the sirens and sends the crowds inside. I sometimes hear them from my little room, raise my head from my books, crack the door, and watch as the drenched street dwellers mill among the stacks. After a few minutes, I return and figure out where I left off.

I believe in those rooms. And in libraries. I also believe in kitchens, coffee shops, park benches, and the shade of oak trees. These places allow studying to temporarily remove me from this uncertain, sometimes tragic world. It's a kind of asylum. When I focus down into my books, the pages are all I see, and my thoughts are all I hear. Everything else disappears. Studying becomes a communion in which I read and assimilate and grow. It steadies me. It flings me back toward myself like a reflection, until I have but one focus: the insightful person I hope to be.

At the end of the day, I return to studying the way one returns home. After dinner, I drive against the flow of traffic back to the library. In my sterile room, I seat myself. It is only me, this simple student, some lecture notes, a couple books, and a pen. The laws of physics are here too, pressing me deep into this cold chair. The world is now silenced. My eyes scan what's laid before me. Here, in this human embryology text, is an illustration of the primitive structures of the human heart, the *bulbus cordis* and *conus arteriosus*. And over there is the adult heart, in full developed form. My eyes shift from one picture to the other. I take more notes, doodle, stare at a blank wall, and let my eyes adjust. Somewhere in all this, a synapse fires. A new

pathway forms. So this is how the heart came to be shaped the way it is! But I feel something separate from that. Learning something new is like a small epiphany. I finally get it.

*Dr. Clint Morehead was born, raised, and educated in Louisville, Kentucky, and is now a palliative medicine doctor in San Diego, California. His work has been featured in *Becoming A Doctor: From Student to Specialist*, *Doctor-Writers Share Their Experiences* (W. W. Norton, 2010), the *Louisville Review*, and the *Journal of Palliative Medicine*. He is a 2010 winner of the Al Smith Fellowship for creative nonfiction and founder of The Kentucky Books for Patients Project, an organization that places books by Kentucky authors in cancer centers across the state. He wrote this essay in 2005 as a first-year medical student in Louisville.*

The Power of Comedy

John Cheadle Rich - Cincinnati, Ohio

As heard on *The Bob Edwards Show*, August 23, 2013



When John Cheadle Rich was nine years old, he learned the power of comedy when he made his mother laugh during a dark time. Now, he believes that especially when life is not very funny, it's important to leave room for laughter.

Age Group: [18 - 30](#)

Themes: [faith & religion](#)

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I remember one spring afternoon when I was nine years old, I was running outside to play. As I sprinted through the kitchen, I noticed my mother sitting in the shadows. Her sorrowful expression hit me—I hadn't seen her smile or laugh all day. Then I thought back; I actually hadn't seen or heard her laugh all week. I thought even further back—no, make that at least a month without hearing my mother's cacklingly infectious laugh.

In that moment, I made it my mission in life to make my mother laugh. This was no easy feat. I was a very quiet and serious nine-year-old boy, not much given to clowning. Even then, my joke repertoire consisted mostly of booger and fart jokes. I tried telling some of those to my mother. She didn't roll her eyes or even give me a critical look. She just smiled. Her smile told me that she knew what I was up to, and she appreciated the gesture, but she just didn't feel like laughing. Maybe at the time, she didn't even think she was capable of laughter. I forget which joke finally got through to her, but eventually, I made my mother laugh.

When I became an adult, my mother told me she remembered that incident. She told me that my making her laugh helped her through a dark time. I didn't know it at the time, but my mother was seeing a therapist

for depression. She told me that my mission to make her laugh was part of her healing process. I didn't know the clinical terms, but even as a nine-year-old, I could tell that laughing made my mother feel better. Not only did it help her, it helped me. It made me feel powerful. I realized how important it is to have comedy in our lives.

On September 15, 2001, just four days after the attacks, I moved to Chicago to begin my training as a Christian minister at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. As part of our orientation, the school had planned to take us to see the Second City comedy troupe; of course the show was cancelled. In those days and weeks following September 11, there was much ado about the death of irony after 9/11, and people fretting over when it would be appropriate to laugh again. I laughed. The death of irony was ironic in itself and I knew when I would laugh again—as soon as someone made me. I was delighted that same week to discover “The Onion,” a Chicago-based satirical weekly paper. The headlines read, “Terrorists Surprised to Find Selves in Hell” and “Attacks Did Little Damage, Claim Quadraxon Officials.”

As I moved through my theological studies and practical training for ministry, I discovered that faith is fundamentally comic. Jesus used his resurrection to play a practical joke on two of his disciples as they were walking on the road to Emmaus. When I was in a hospital room with a family gathered around a loved one who had just passed away, there was always at least one moment of laughter.

The comedy of faith looks at all the suffering, death and destruction in the world, and laughs at it. Life is not always a triumphant victory march, but neither is it every completely obliterated. Life slips away, but it pops back up like Charlie Chaplin after slipping on a banana peel. I believe in the power of comedy.

John Cheadle Rich was born a very quiet and serious child. However, through the love, support, and hard work of parents, siblings, friends, and mentors, John's journey to overcome his comedic deficiencies has been a remarkable one. He can now function at an almost normal level when telling a joke or making a funny face. Along the way, John has found work as a construction worker, AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteer, telephone survey-taker, pastor, Co-Executive Director of a nonprofit organization, and registered nurse.

The Essentials to Happiness

Alexxandra Shuman - South Burlington, Vermont
As heard on *The Bob Edwards Show*, August 16, 2013



When Alexxandra Shuman was in eighth grade, she was diagnosed with clinical depression. But it took more than medication for her to feel happy again. Ms. Shuman believes she has to look in the right places in order to find happiness.

Age Group: [18 - 30](#)

Themes: [hope](#), [love](#)

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As a child, I was generally happy, singing and dancing to my favorite songs, smiling and laughing with my friends and family. But as far back as second grade, I noticed a "darkness," about me. I didn't enjoy engaging in many things. I didn't relate to my peers in elementary school because they appeared so happy, and I didn't have that ability to achieve happiness so easily.

In middle school things in my life began to get even worse. I began withdrawing from everything I once enjoyed—swimming, tennis, family. I hated going to sleep knowing I had to wake up to another day. I was always tired. Everything was horrible. Finally, midway through eighth grade, I was told I had a chemical imbalance, diagnosed with clinical depression, and put on medication. It took months for me to feel the effects of the medication.

When I began to feel happy again is when I realized that I had to take the responsibility for getting better myself, rather than relying on medication and therapy alone. Aristotle said, "To live happily is an inward power of the soul," and I believe that this quote describes what I had to do to achieve happiness. Happiness is a journey. Everyone seems to need different things to be happy. But I believe people are blinded from what truly makes one happy.

Growing up, we're encouraged to be successful in life, but how is success defined? Success and happiness are imagined now as having a lot of money. It is so untrue. Recently I went to Costa Rica and visited the small town of El Roble. I spent the day with a nine-year-old girl named Marilyn. She took me to her house to meet her parents. It was obvious that they were not rich, living in a small house with seven children. The house was cluttered but full of life. Those who have decided that success and happiness comes from having money and a big house would be appalled at how utterly happy this family from El Roble is. People say that seeing things like that makes you appreciate what you have, but for me, it made me envy them for being so happy without all the things I have.

"The essentials to happiness are something to love, something to do, and something to hope for," a quote from William Blake sums up what I believe people need to realize to be truly happy in life. People need love; I feel they need their family and their friends more than anything in the world. People need work to do,

something to make them feel they are making a difference in the world. People need to know that more good is to come in the future, so they continue to live for “now” instead of constantly worrying about the bad that could come. And most importantly, people need to know that happiness is not something that happens overnight. Love and hope are happiness.

Alexxandra Shuman wrote this piece when she was 16. She is now a 24-year-old graduate of Smith College with a degree in Art History. After studying at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, she discovered her passion and is now completing her second year at the New England Culinary Institute. She has curated exhibits at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art and recently completed an internship at the renowned WildFlour Pastry in Charleston, South Carolina. She is very happy.

Music Makes Me Come Alive

Joan Tower - Red Hook, New York

As heard on NPR's *All Things Considered*, November 27, 2006



After 60 years of composing, Joan Tower believes more than ever in the power of music. She says it nourishes our souls, encourages us to feel, connects us to one another and helps us change the world.

Age Group: [50 - 65](#)

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After 60 plus years of composing and performing, I believe more than ever in the extraordinary power of music.

In this day of fast information and communication, music nourishes our inner souls. As tensions between nations continue, music reaches beyond borders. At weddings, funerals, inaugurations, and parades, music gives us public permission to feel and share things. In fact, music has always been a shared thing — between the creator, the performer, and the audience. Music connects me to people I don't even know.

Strong music puts you in a space where you forget about yourself. It's like a good movie. It's an escape. You lose yourself. It's a license to feel, sing, shout, and to dance.

Do you remember when you first fell in love? Was there a song associated with that love? When you hear that song now, do you think of that person and actually remember what you felt? Maybe you even cry.

When I was growing up, my life largely centered around boys and sex. I was into music, but music didn't always give me the nourishment that boys did. It takes time and patience to be nourished by music. Now, I can say, without music I would be lost.

A conductor once told me that music had kept him off the streets and even out of jail. Music became a kind of “survival” phenomena for him (and for me, too). It is our drug of choice because it has given us the extraordinary lasting inner experience that has even replaced real drugs, vacations, money, fame, and all the things we associate with pleasure and excitement. A friend of mine who happens to be an extraordinary pianist and still practices up to five hours a day once said to me, “The piano is my best friend. I can't think of anyone better to spend my time with.”

I feel the same way about composing. I'm in the studio from 1:00 to 5:30 religiously, every day. I used to run from the studio — I'd tell myself I had to clean or make a telephone call, anything to get out of there. Now I look forward to these hours. Composing is slow — I wait for the right notes. The hardest thing is to get your soul down on the page and have it come out on the other side in a way that works.

Music is not just my most trusted friend. It makes me come alive, to show strength and passion and to feel useful. Music makes me feel like I'm doing something terribly important. I believe that with music I can help to change the world around me — if just a little bit.

Composer and pianist Joan Tower was born in New York and spent her youth in Bolivia where her father worked as a mining engineer. Her most famous works include "Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman" and the tone poem "Sequoia." Tower teaches at Bard College.

When Ordinary People Achieve Extraordinary Things

Jody Williams - Fredericksburg, Virginia

As heard on NPR's *All Things Considered*, January 9, 2006



Photo by Nubar Alexanian

Jody Williams believes extraordinary things can happen when ordinary people decide to take action. Her own activism led to a 1997 international treaty banning landmines and to a Nobel Peace Prize.

Age Group: [50 - 65](#)

Themes: [change](#), [charity & service](#), [integrity](#), [responsibility](#)

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I believe it is possible for ordinary people to achieve extraordinary things. For me, the difference between an "ordinary" and an "extraordinary" person is not the title a person might have, but what that person does to make the world a better place for us all.

I don't know why people choose to do what they do. When I was a kid I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up, but I knew what I didn't want to do. I didn't want to grow up, have 2.2 kids, get married. And I certainly didn't think about being an activist. I didn't even really know what one was.

My older brother is deaf. Growing up, I ended up defending him and I often think that is what started me on my path to whatever I am today.

When I was approached with the idea of trying to create a landmine campaign, we were just three people in a small office in Washington, DC in late 1991. I had more than a few ideas about how to begin a campaign, but what if nobody cared? What if nobody responded? But I knew the only way to answer those questions was to accept the challenge.

But if I have any power as an individual, it's because I work with other individuals around the world. We are ordinary people — Jemma from Armenia, Paul from Canada, Kosal from Cambodia, Haboubba from Lebanon, Christian from Norway, Diana from Colombia, Margaret from Uganda and thousands more — who have

worked together to bring about extraordinary change. The landmine campaign is not just about landmines — it's about the power of individuals to work with governments in a different way.

I believe in both my right and my responsibility to work to create a world that doesn't glorify violence and war, but where we seek different solutions to our common problems. I believe that these days, daring to voice your opinion, daring to find out information from a variety of sources, can be an act of courage.

I know that holding such beliefs and speaking them publicly is not always easy or comfortable or popular — particularly in the post-9/11 world. But I believe that life isn't a popularity contest. I really don't care what people say about me — and people have said plenty. For me, it's about trying to do the right thing — even when nobody else is looking.

I believe worrying about the problems plaguing our planet without taking steps to confront them is irrelevant. The only thing that changes this world is action.

Most people tend to get caught up in going to college, then getting a job, buying a house and paying the mortgage. Somehow, I've had the desire — and the drive — to do things a bit differently.

I believe that words are easy — the truth is told in the actions we take. If enough ordinary people back up our desire for a better world with action, I believe we can, in fact, accomplish extraordinary things.

Jody Williams is the founding coordinator of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. For her efforts, she shared the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize with the Campaign. Williams previously worked to build awareness about U.S. policy toward Central America, and did humanitarian work for people in El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Leaving Identity Issues to Other Folks

Phyllis Allen - Fort Worth, Texas

As heard on NPR's *All Things Considered*, July 11, 2005



Photo by Nubar Alexanian

For years, Phyllis Allen found her belief in the social movement of the times: from civil rights to Black Power. Now in her 50s, she is finally able to believe in the woman she is.

Age Group: [50 - 65](#)

Themes: [brotherhood & friendship](#), [love](#), [race](#), [self-determination](#), [tolerance](#)

Standing in the rain waiting to go up the steps to the balcony of the Grand Theater I gripped Mama's hand and watched the little blond kids enter the lobby downstairs. It was the '50s, I was "colored" and this is what I believed: My place was in the balcony of the downtown theater, the back of the bus, and the back steps of the White Dove Barbecue Emporium. When I asked Mama why this was so, she smiled and said, "Baby, people do what they do. What you got to do is be the best that you can be."

We got our first television in the '60s and it brought into my living room the German shepherds, snapping at a young girl's heels. It showed children just like me going to school passing through throngs of screaming, angry folks, chanting words I wasn't allowed to say. I could no longer be "colored." We were Negroes now,

marching in the streets for our freedom — at least, that's what the preacher said. I believed that, even though I was scared, I had to be brave and stand up for my rights.

In the '70s: beat-up jeans, hair like a nappy halo, and my clenched fist raised, I stood on the downtown street shouting. Angry young black men in sleek black leather jackets and berets had sent out a call from the distant shores of Oakland, California. No more non-violence or standing on the front lines quietly while we were being beaten. Simple courtesies like "please" and "thank you" were over. It was official: Huey, H. Rap, and Eldridge said so. I believed in being black and angry.

By the '80s, fertility gods lined the walls and crammed the display cases of all my friends' houses. People who'd never been closer to Africa than a Tarzan movie were speaking broken Swahili. The '80s made us hyphenated: African-American. Swaddled in elaborately woven costumes of flowing design, bright colors, and rich gold I was a pseudo-African, who'd never seen Africa. "It's your heritage," is what everybody said. Now, I believed in the elusive promise of the Motherland.

In the '90s, I was a woman whose skin happened to be brown, chasing the American dream. Everybody said that the dream culminated in stuff. I believed in spending days shopping. Debt? I didn't care about no stinkin' debt. It was the '90s. My 401(k) was in the mid-six figures and I believed in American Express. Then came the crash, and American Express didn't believe in me nearly as much as I believed in it.

Now, it's a brand new millennium and the bling-bling, video generation ain't about me. Everything changed when I turned 50. Along with the wrinkles, softened muscles, and weak eyesight came the confidence that allows me to stick to a very small list of beliefs. I'll leave those identity issues to other folks. I believe that I'm free to be whoever I choose to be. I believe in being a good friend, lover, and parent so that I can have good friends, lovers, and children. I believe in being a woman — the best that I can be, like my Mama said.

Phyllis Allen has sold yellow pages advertising for 15 years. She spends about half her working hours in her car covering her territory around Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas. When she retires, she hopes to get rid of her car and telephone books and pursue her first passion, writing.